

ROUTLEDGE ADVANCES IN SOCIOLOGY

Digital Publics

Cultural political economy,
financialisation and creative
organisational politics

John Michael Roberts

Digital Publics

Today we often hear academics, commentators, pundits and politicians telling us that new media has transformed activism, providing an array of networks for ordinary people to become creatively involved in a multitude of social and political practices.

But what exactly is the ideology lurking behind these positive claims made about digital publics?

By recourse to various critical thinkers, including Marx, Bakhtin, Deleuze and Guattari, and Gramsci, *Digital Publics* systematically unpacks this ideology. It explains how a number of influential social theorists and management gurus have consistently argued that we now live in new informational times based in global digital systems and new financial networks, which create new subjectivities and power relations in societies.

Digital Publics traces the historical roots of this thinking, demonstrates its flaws and offers up an alternative Marxist-inspired theory of the public sphere, cultural political economy and financialisation.

The book will appeal to scholars and students of cultural studies, critical management studies, political science and sociology.

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1 Introduction

Digital publics and cultural political economy

Introduction

It is common for many social commentators to argue that at least since the 1980s there has been a gradual shift towards the 'aestheticization of everyday life'. Usually this is taken to imply that capitalism is now overwhelmed by images and signs associated with a proliferation in advertising, brands, media spectacles, reality TV, smart digital technology and so on. We live in an age of excessive consumption where the exchange value of goods has overtaken the use value so that life no longer has any 'depth' but has itself collapsed into an array of images (Featherstone 1990: 66–67). Culture and communication media now saturate society to such an extent that we can finally talk about a 'cultural circuit of capital' that has taken hold in society. Culture is said to have moved beyond the consumption of goods to encompass a whole range of social spheres. Today, so some argue, culture circulates through consumption, production, identity, representation and regulation (see du Gay 1997).

Some in business and management broadly agree with these sentiments. Popular management texts, for instance, often herald the onset of network 'fluid' organisational formations based primarily around the ascendancy of information and knowledge. Under these circumstances, organisations are called upon to foster a cultural outlook in their respective workforce attuned to the need to be responsive and flexible in order to capture and take advantage of the rapid turnover and transformation of global information and knowledge. What were once thought to be stable social structures have thus increasingly given way to fluid and messy social processes. Business guru Alec Reed (2003: 4–8) is typical of those from the management community who suggest that the nation-state has lost its powers to create wealth and regulate a country's labour markets. Indeed, suggests Reed in a manner that evokes some contemporary sociological insights, the social structures once associated with the welfare state are disappearing, to be replaced by the likes of 'fluid' temporary job markets (Reed 2003: 14). Meanwhile, Davis and Meyer (1998) employ the metaphor of 'blur' to describe what's novel about the 'new' global economy.

In the BLUR world, products and services are merging. Buyers sell and sellers buy. Neat value chains are messy economic webs. Homes are

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offices. No longer is there a clear line between structure and process, owning and using, knowing and learning, real and virtual. Less and less separates employee and employer. In the world of capital – itself as much a liability as an asset – value moves so fast you can't tell stock from flow. On every front, opposites are blurring.

(Davis and Meyer 1998: 7)

Others, however, adopt a different and arguably more critical approach towards the informational economy. Jessop (2005) situates the rise of the informational economy within the structural contradictions and strategic dilemmas of contemporary capitalism. In particular, he is interested in how specific 'economic imaginaries' become established through semiotic material and discursive narratives, and aim to legitimise new or existing socio-economic hegemonic projects, such as that of neoliberalism. In this respect he makes a distinction between the contradictions and strategic dilemmas evident in 'real' socio-economic projects and how the economy is 'imaginatively narrated (as a) more or less coherent subset of these activities' (Jessop 2005: 145; see also Sum 2009). Of course, the two are closely connected because narratives must be attached to socio-economic relations in order to prove convincing, while narratives likewise serve to naturalise socio-economic activities if accepted as being common sense by enough people. Nevertheless, where Jessop also differs from the other informational perspectives described is in his belief that the discursive and non-discursive realms are closely connected but do not collapse into one another. For these reasons, Jessop is critical of many informational perspectives because he thinks they often become part of hegemonic and discursive projects that naturalise and mystify specific contradictions in society.

This book takes some of the theoretical insights developed by Jessop and other critical theorists of cultural political economy, and applies and develops them to investigate what is sometimes referred to as the digital public sphere, or just 'digital publics'. By recourse to a Marxist approach to cultural political economy, the book therefore unpacks some of the empirical and theoretical assumptions deeply embedded within digital publics in order to ascertain exactly what might constitute a meaningful type of political engagement in today's new media public spheres. This is a worthwhile project if for no other reason than the fact that some of what is claimed or said about the capacity for digital publics to make a political impact in society is often rather moderate in a sense of containing political aspirations within existing liberal institutions. Alternatively, much of what is written about digital publics by left-liberals and political radicals often makes assertions that are far too general to be useful. Most commonly, they argue we have entered a qualitative new period in history in which political activism has changed beyond all recognition from previous periods, and that digital technology now socially constructs knowledge about our world around us. The current book seeks to criticise both viewpoints, although it concentrates more on the second school of thought because the book shares many of this school's empirical and theoretical beliefs. Before we

map out the content of this book in more detail, it is worth, first, examining some of the assertions made about the changing nature of the public sphere in relation to digital technology.

Digital publics and mobile communications

Arising as a way to understand the nature, shape and form of how people might become involved in democracy and participation, the term ‘public sphere’ directs one’s attention to the different mechanisms and ways of getting people to engage in debate and discussion with one another. To this extent, Somers provides a neat definition of the public sphere as being

a contested participatory site in which actors with overlapping identities as legal subjects, citizens, economic actors, and family and community members, form a public body and emerge in negotiations and contestations over political and social life.

(Somers 1993: 589)

Drache (2008) adds that because of its contested participatory nature it is often difficult to know where to draw the line for rights and responsibilities between private interests and public purposes. Globalisation gives this issue a further dimension, says Drache, because it compels nation-states to look at their traditional conceptions of rights for their citizens within a context of rapidly porous boundaries between countries. ‘Societies need rules, and when political power is no longer contained within the nation-state, finding new ways to address transnational issues, from poverty eradication to climate change, becomes a primary focus point for publics’ (Drache 2008: 8).

The rise of global and digital societies has also prompted some to argue that the boundaries of the public sphere have fundamentally altered in form and content. Digital technology naturally lends itself to circulating debates, documents, information, images, video footage and so forth, across the globe. The very fact that all of these modes of communication are transformed into zeroes and ones indicates how information can be compressed and transferred across technological formats, such as credit cards, iPads, laptops, library cards, phones and TV. This convergence of media formats means that information is now interchangeable across digital networks and through a wide variety of technological arrangements and formats (Miller 2011: 73–74).

But the effects that digital media has on society is also part of a broader set of assertions made about contemporary societies. Many believe, for example, that we live in digital networked times in which ‘normal’ boundaries associated with ‘modern’ societies have become blurred and liquid-like. Urban space has become more complex, with different spatial scales, nodes and networks criss-crossing one another in new ways. Computer networks, airports, roads, mobile phones and so on are both moored to specific spaces such as an office and they are free of these moorings to move across

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other connected nodes and bring to life new spatial relations with other human and non-human bodies and objects. Consumption has therefore inescapably become grounded in everyday representations. Globalisation, for example, is portrayed to us through the likes of everyday consumer products (e.g. coca-cola cans), iconic figures (e.g. Nelson Mandela) and global communities (e.g. the Olympic Games). As a result, the 'private' consumption of everyday goods is irrevocably connected with a global public (Szerszynski and Urry 2006). Internet technology is an exemplary symbol of these developments. People now gain everyday public information sitting in their private spaces at home, while data transforms people into 'bits' of information to be reassembled elsewhere in numerous databases into non-private virtual selves (Hannam *et al.* 2006; Sheller and Urry 2003).

Mobility is likewise palpable in the way in which the temporal rhythms of the normal working week have changed. Laguerre (2004) observes that while it is still possible to delineate what he terms is the 'civil week' comprised by a linear notion of time – working from the morning until the evening for example – he also notes that we have become immersed in a 'cyberweek'. This latter temporal movement is a continual non-linear 168-hour week. These days, therefore, a week is both linear and non-linear and gives us the choice and freedom of how to structure our day. 'Because the cyberweek has no fixed beginning or end, it does not follow the logic of any of these other weeks. It may start or end at any time' (Laguerre 2004: 230). Different temporalities can therefore be noted based around the fluid interrelationships of a civil week and a cyberweek. Both flow into one another, thus creating a situation in which cyberweek and civil week feed off from one another and instigate new temporal hybrids. Other consequences follow these changing coordinates of time. Work time can now be compressed into fewer, albeit longer, working days, which in turn alters leisure time.

Arguably, one of the best illustrations of how digital media has reconfigured the public–private divide comes in the guise of mobile phones. While the first venture into commercial mobile telephony arose in the USA just two years after the Second World War, it was in 1979 that the so-called 'first generation' (1G) commercial cellular network system was established in Tokyo. Increasing digitalisation of mobile phones during the 1980s and 1990s meant that they could be devised with greater features such as address books and an alarm setting. It is during this period that mobiles started becoming a ubiquitous element of life. But these 'second generation' (2G) mobile phones were soon being eclipsed by 'third generation' phones throughout the early 2000s. Equipped with more interactive elements, mobile phones entered an era that saw them converge their design with other media devices and formats such as computer databases, the Internet, movies, satellite images and so on (see Green and Haddon 2009; Lacohee *et al.* 2003). In a relatively short space of time, then, the form and content of mobile phones have obviously made some dramatic changes but they have also visibly changed social behaviour along with the relationship between public space and private space.

Personalisation is also evident in the use of mobile phones. Think momentarily about communities. According to Wellman (2001), whereas people once lived in close-knit communities based on face-to-face interaction, this was slowly being merged by place-to-place interaction throughout the twentieth century. Cars, for example, enabled people to move around locations beyond where they lived and this meant that they could socialise beyond immediate communities. With the rise of mobile technology and cyberspace communities we have now moved into the era of person-to-person interaction. People no longer have to be physically present to the person they want to communicate and interact with. At the same time, though, new modes of digital communication encourage individuals to stay in regular contact with others. Personalised community networks, Wellman further observes, thus encourage greater socialising between individual people in a manner no longer restricted by physical boundaries. Far from fragmenting society, mobile phones can therefore serve to reconfigure public and private spaces in ways that strengthen friendship and family ties. On one level, at least it is possible to say that mobile technologies therefore at a minimum give people a sense of being permanently connected to other people and other spaces (Sloop and Gunn 2010).

Other research finds that mobiles bring families together in new, meaningful ways. Devitt and Roker (2009) discovered that mobile phones helped families manage their lives in a generally positive way. Mobiles are a convenient technological tool for family members to speak to one another. Moreover, parents told Devitt and Roker that mobiles offered security and safety for their children, while children generally felt that some functions of a mobile phone such as text messaging offered them new avenues to discuss potentially difficult subjects, say, being bullied at school, in an alternative environments that they considered to be 'safer'. In these instances, mobile phones have helped to consolidate particular social ties. Geser (2006) nevertheless insists that mobile phones do not necessarily develop new social ties but tend instead to strengthen existing social ties (e.g. family social ties). In this way, mobile phones reinforce close-knit social ties in an almost pre-modern, traditional manner in the sense that mobiles contribute towards making one dependent on a narrow range of 'significant others'. Increasingly we 'keep in touch' with significant others and in the process strengthen divisions and boundaries between others and ourselves.

Schroeder (2010) adds an important caveat here by arguing that while similarities can be noted across societies there are also important cultural differences between countries in the use of mobiles. For example, in Sweden and the USA people use the Internet to send emails more so than in Japan and Korea. One of the reasons for this is that in Japan and Korea there is generally no limit to the amount of information one can place on a text message, and so these are used like traditional emails. What follows from this is that the changing boundaries between public and private will no doubt also be distinct in different countries. Others point out that mobile phones often serve to disrupt social interaction between people rather than strengthen